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ABSTRACT

American society has been and is beset by contradictions and the best that can be said for it is that it has manifested good intentions and poor performance. Merit and money, education and success - in short, all the keys to advancement in American society until recently - have been closely guarded from those citizens who lacked the proper credentials of race and ethnic background. Though we are moving toward a more equal society in the 1970's, it is a period of conflict and tension. In addition, many of what seemed to be essential truths 20 or 30 years ago are now regarded as platitudes, such as the belief in integration, which has been replaced by the desire for pluralism. These changes in outlook have profoundly affected higher education, with students wanting the universities to be small scale replicas of a new egalitarian and pluralistic society. With pressures also increasing from other parts of society, higher education is in a state of almost constant turmoil. One of the great concerns in the period ahead is thought to be the conflict between equality and excellence; yet these two are not necessarily antithetical. The real problem will be to change our testing methods and selection mechanisms so that these will not be discriminatory, and also to create diverse pathways to obtaining academic degrees. (AF)

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EQUALITY AND EXCELLENCE: THE CHALLENGE OF THE 1970's IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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American life, even in an era as turbulent as this one, is endlessly elliptical and fascinating. We are filled with strange complexities and contradictions, some utterly comic, others desperately tragic.

University students tell us that our society is evil and corrupt, but we are not that simple. If a small child tumbles down a dry well in Kansas, in a short time much of the country will be glued to its radios, hoping and praying for his rescue. If a white fireman is photographed rescuing a black baby in Chicago, nearly the whole nation will weep unashamed tears of joy.

Professional flagwavers and self-styled patriots tell us that our society is benign and beautiful, but we are not that simple either. Women and children are being slaughtered and maimed by the thousands at our hands in Viet Nam. Do many of us seem to care? Nor do we need to go half way around the world in order to discover American callousness.

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Hundreds of the nameless and the faceless die daily in the failing ghettos of our cities, often in the most tragic circumstances. They are passed by, ignored, and few Americans ask whether or how it might have been prevented.

How is it that the same nation which weeps for joy at the rescue of a single child, turns insensate from hundreds of unnecessary deaths in its cities? How can the same people bomb children in Viet Nam and then spend millions of dollars to bring them to the United States in order to repair them? These are the inner contradictions of an exceptionally involuted social order. They are our contradictions, and they ought to suggest caution in ascribing any simplistic character good or bad, to America in the 1970's. We are both good and bad, admirable and hateful, beautiful and evil. We are complicated and diverse; difficult to understand and difficult to predict.

Such preliminary words of caution are vital to any discussion of human rights in this era in order that we may avoid becoming trapped in tired

rhetoric on the one hand and mawkish sentimentality on the other. Three decades ago any discussion of human rights started from the Constitution. We cited the protections afforded to all Americans in virtue of their birthright and challenged our adversaries to show us any basis of government more democratic or more humane. Now we realize that three decades ago we were extremely naive. Despite the Constitution and despite its protections we had built a society that was inherently discriminatory while claiming to be the opposite. The best that could be said for us is that American society manifested good intentions and poor performance. All Americans were born free and equal, but only certain Americans could live where they chose, go to school where they chose, eat where they chose, work where they chose. Despite our belief that aristocracy had been replaced by meritocracy in America, success or failure was not simple a matter of merit or even of money. Merit and money, education and success, in short all the keys to advancement in American society, were closely guarded from those of its citizens lacking proper credentials of race and ethnic background. We had constructed a texture of

social institutions and standards that effectively trapped Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Indians and Chicanos in poverty and self-hatred, and that mocked the Constitution which proclaimed all men to be free and equal. During the 1950's and 1960's we began to realize the awful consequences of these essential contradictions and set about changing them. But the people we sought to bring into the mainstream of American life had already discovered its racist structure for themselves long ago. Hence when change began, a host of liberation movements were set in motion to accelerate the pace of change and to drive us toward true equality at a rate that is at once faster than middle America can travel and slower than the need if we are to prevent widespread social turmoil.

The condition of human rights in America as we began the 1970's is thus seen to be a complex and contradictory phenomenon, as confused as the rest of our social order. We are clearly moving toward a more equal society, but a society far more characterized by conflict and

rejection than its progenitors. Many of what seemed to be the essential truths about American life only twenty to thirty years ago are now seen to have been platitudes. Once for example we claimed to reject segregation of Blacks as outcasts from white society, yet we tolerated an almost universal practice of such segregation. The contradiction did not seem to trouble us so long as we felt we were working for improvement. Now we reject such thinking as racist. Segregation or integration seem less important to us as polar opposites than the achievement of conditions in which Black People can determine the circumstance of their own lives. If Black students choose separatism in our schools we accept it grudgingly as a necessary circumstance of our times provided they and we can come to accept one another and respect each other as human beings through such choices. Whereas twenty years ago we believed in integration but did not practice it, today we consider such earlier beliefs as less important than a new American

pluralism that encourages each group to find its own place in society; to discover its own heritage and to teach this heritage to others. Thus the new direction of American freedom is founded not on a society lacking in distinctions but on a pluralism that accords each of us the freedom to discover his own identity and his own worth as best he can.

Such changes in outlook and spirit have had a profound effect on higher education in this country. During the last decade we have begun to witness an extraordinary growth of ethical consciousness on university campuses. Our students want their universities to be small-scale symbolic replicas of the new egalitarian and pluralistic society to which they have become committed. Students question every aspect of university life in order to determine whether we measure up to their new-found humanistic standards.

Do we manifest any important connection with military research or weapons development? If we do, then we must eliminate it.

Do we expand our institutions against the interests of the poor

and otherwise defenseless people who live on our doorsteps? If we do, then we may expect to have our students defending them and demanding that we turn over our facilities to the poor.

Are we working for significant increases in numbers of minority students, faculty and administrators? By so doing we create on campus a forerunner of the pluralistic community that we seek to establish in the larger society. If we are not doing it, students by the thousands will denounce us as racist and inhumane.

Finally, how do we conduct our business affairs? Do we discriminate? Do we buy and sell stock without concern for the social consequences of our investments? If we do, we are in for a great deal of trouble from an outraged student body.

Sometimes such trouble when it comes, gets out of hand and infringes on the rights and freedoms which every university must have if it is to be able to pursue truth wherever it leads. Nevertheless university

administrators cannot and must not fail to recognize the great resurgence of ethical concern that lies behind such insistent moralistic pressure from our students. They want to change America in order to make if more open, more equal, and more admirable. How can a nation be said to be corrupt when it produces such young people and when society at large seems at least willing to listen?

Universities have been experiencing serious problems in the face of such extraordinary changes of outlook and spirit on campus. To understand our difficulties, one needs to comprehend the involuted conflicts of American society as I have tried to outline them, but one needs also to understand something of the prior history of universities and the ways in which we once viewed ourselves.

Universities serve many purposes. They are supported in a multitude of ways as they meet these purposes. Accordingly universities take on a variety of subtly different colorations as agencies in society seek to bend us to their own ends.

Radical students seek to forge us into instruments of political and social change in a form and in a direction which the radicals alone define. Minority students tell us that we must be directly involved with their liberation or we cannot continue to exist. Alumni press us to build new football stadiums, or new gymnasiums and to improve our position in intercollegiate athletics. Private donors and benefactors seek to support some intellectual activities and to suppress others. Occasionally they make our responsiveness to such goals a necessary condition of their willingness to give.

This is only the briefest account of society's pressures seeking to shape universities in directions we do not ourselves choose. Some federally sponsored research and scholarship funds contain stipulation that the support will not be granted to a campus that bars military recruiters. Each of these agencies, just as in the case of our students, sees the

university as a little model of a society which that the agency wishes to construct or sustain. Thus we are more than a little bit riven and polarized. All of the turmoil of modern American life finds its way to the campus because each element of American society seeks to shape us according to its unique directives. As I have noted, society is changing, human rights are being redefined or at lease rediscovered, moral and ethical concerns are stronger now than they have ever been, at least in my lifetime. The pressure on universities to follow one pathway or another or perhaps all pathways simultaneously continues to grow year by year.

Perhaps the foremost conflict in American higher education is not a conflict at all but a misapprehension. Nevertheless it gives every indication of generating the most serious concerns during the decade ahead of us. It may be described as the conflict between <u>equality</u> and <u>excellence</u>.

Can our universities continue to manifest a high order of intellectual excellence while broadening educational opportunities to hitherto excluded segments of American society? That is the key question for the next decade. We are already committed to broadened educational opportunity. What, if anything may we expect to lose in excellence as a consequence of such commitments? It appears on the basis of some of his comments last year during the crisis at the University of Michigan, that the Vice President has concluded that excellence goes down the drain when admission standards are modified in order to enroll increased numbers of minority students. I am not so sure. The potential conflict between equality and excellence in our universities may not be a conflict at all but simply a challenge to our ingenuity. Everything depends on whether we can continue to maintain stiff exit standards while we find ways to modify admission standards.

Every university worthy of the name has an inner life of the utmost excellence not entirely related to the interests of students or administrators.

At Columbia we have some of the most remarkable scholars in the world. These include specialists possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of the language, philosophy and culture of the ancient Chinese empire. Across the campus there is a biophysicist with the ability to make extremely precise measurements of the color sensitivity of the eye. In fact a few years ago a Barnard College girl mentioned to her instructor that picture hanging on the wall looked different to her when she covered up first one eye and then the other. The instructor mentioned this peculiar experience to a colleague and word got back to my friend, the expert in color vision. He tested the young lady and found to his amazement that she was color blind in one eye while the other was normal. She was one of a half dozen such cases discovered in the the scientific literature. Where else but in a great university could such a casual observation have been picked up and its significance fully realized? In still another building on campus is a physicist with the

intuitive ability to conceptualize spaces in six or more dimensions so that he can solve equations of motion at a glance while his colleagues languish in a mass of symbols.

These are all highly specialized talents characteristic of an elite community. Some of these talents have great usefulness to society. Some of them have no practical significance whatever (at least just now), but all of them manifest the elite inner life of the university.

In European society where universities began, they were intended to serve as training grounds for an elite class of specially privileged young people who were to inherit the management and direction of a social order that depended to a large extent on hereditary privilege.

Thus the elitism and exclusiveness which many of America's best universities admired and sought to propagate until very recently, derives not just from the high standards of their faculties, but from the practical need evidenced by their forbears in Europe to train and reinforce a social elite. The Ivy League universities and America's best undergraduate

colleges display just this kind of background.

But much of America's history in higher education proceeds from a different tradition. The land grant colleges and universities of the mid-West and far-West were established for the purpose of creating universal access to higher education as the key to the economic development of pioneer territories. Open admissions policies are no novelty for these great schools. They have always sought to provide low cost education of the highest order of excellence to every student who could benefit from it. They sought to solve the dilemma of easy admissions and tough exit standards, by developing a harsh screening system in freshman year that forced large numbers of students to flunk out. During this century these state colleges and universities have led the way in creating an educational foundation for the technological superstate that America has become. It is because of them that we found it so easy to think of ourselves as a meritocracy departing abruptly from the elitism of

our earlier university traditions in Europe. Anyone who has made it into such a system and who has hung on long enough to succeed in it admires what it gave him. There are no alumni who can match the graduates of state universities and colleges in loyalty or fervor.

Yet as we confront today's problems and the angry demands posed by Black and Latin student organizations, a clear conviction grows that even this meritocratic educational system is discriminatory. Measured educational ability has long been observed to be linked to socio-economic status and the latter is clearly connected to race and ethnic background. Do we then not provide a subtle mechanism for propagating such class distinctions by the very testing methods we use in order to measure intellectual merit? The conclusion of most educators and psychologists today is that we do. Thus the problem we face in the decade ahead is the problem of breaking such linkage.

We have committed appalling sins in the past by interpreting psychological tests without reference to the performance of normative

groups drawn from the same social and ethnic backgrounds as our students. We have tended unconsciously, but nevertheless very effectively to guide minority students away from academic studies and toward vocational programs because we accepted such test scores uncritically. This is not a determination of ability. This is not a determination of merit. It is not even a level of analysis worthy of professional standards. It must be stopped and fortunately universities are close enough to first principles to be willing to lead the way in seeing that it is stopped.

After more than a century of graduate and professional specialization in higher education in this country we are discovering that we have much less assurance about the selection mechanisms we apply to students than we had thirty years ago.

Universities are at least beginning to experiment with their entrance

requirements in order to learn what the problems are and to gain experience with the needs of the educationally disadvantaged. It is perfectly clear that in an era of large-scale student unrest and confrontation we cannot correct our admissions errors by the harsh screening mechanisms and high flunk-out rates of earlier meritocracies. Thus we have no alternative but to create diverse pathways to degrees if we seek to maintain our standards of excellence. In the best of all possible worlds education would then become completely tailored to the needs of students and each student would follow a program uniquely matched to his needs, under the watchful eyes of academic counsellors and faculty. But we have neither the fiscal or faculty resources to accomplish even a fraction of what needs doing if we are to be effective in creating a new and more equal society.

This is the basic challenge to our ingenuity. No one yet knows how to go about it. My own judgment is that we need to consider a

change in what we now do during the last two years of college. Modern technology has the capacity to revolutionize university libraries making them into large and decentralized learning centers. Videotaped courses and programmed instruction will soon become the natural adjuncts of library books. I envision a time when all our students will spend a period of time passing through the learning center while they acquire the necessary skills for higher course work. In view of the great flexibility of modern technology, this preliminary automated course work need not even be done on campus. The resources of our library or learning center could be distributed to storefronts all over the area we serve. Thus students requiring much remedial training would pass more slowly through the learning center than students with lesser needs, but the diversity of pathways necessary for matching resources to needs could be accomplished with relative ease.

Will it happen? We need plans and resources and we do not now have them. But the outline of my proposal suggests that there is no

necessary conflict between equality and excellence in American higher education, only a challenge to our ingenuity and our skill.

We call ourselves educators. Let us then set about proving it by meeting the challenge of equality and excellence in American higher education during the 1970's. There is no task more worthy of our most imaginative efforts. We need plans. We need resources.

But most of all we need to begin.